INTRODUCTION. This a theoretical poster. Its explores the way for a comprehensive understanding of the human mind. Philosophers and neuroscientists often reject the claim that their theory of the mind and the mental phenomena is in any way ‘reductive’. This adjective typically involves the crucial negligence of essential features of the subjective and a too narrow scientific outlook. I show here that by adequately connecting the theory of the extended mind (EM) with the philosophical theory of capacities or abilities, which is attributed to Aristotle (V b. C.), such negligence can be avoided. A more precise, integrative and open-ended view of the mind emerges then, a view which I will only sketch here.

Cognitive neural prosthetics (CNPs) are being currently tested to help patients with paralysis to successfully perform some basic tasks in a computer. This is a step forward which promises to simplify everyday life for many patients. CNPs also promise to restore mobility or communication by way of artificial limbs and other devices. Their use poses a number of ethical and philosophical questions. For instance, if CNPs, whether organic or not, can be seamlessly integrated into the subject’s neural network and be made to work as neurons in everything which is relevant to tasks—performance, should they be considered as an intrinsic part of the network? Could they be looked as a legitimate part of the system then, be taken as part of the mind itself?

Neuroprosthetics

CNP links into a philosophical theory which has expanded the content and whereabouts of the mind. The extended mind theory (EMT) contends that the mind and its neural pathways do not confine to the limits of the skin-and-skeletal barrier, but extend in equal proportion to external objects interacting with it. Depending on the degree of integration of these objects, they may be called to be part of the mind as neurons are claimed to be so. And so, if a patient with a neural implant is made capable of reading and producing it corresponding neural waves not just to performing ordinary tasks with artificial limbs, but also to enhancing her speed in calculation, the neural implant, whether organic or not, should be credited as part of the neural system tout court. It should be considered true, as the EMT proponents hold, that epistemic action demands spread of epistemic credit (Clarke & Chalmers, 1998: 8). And so if you can perform epistemic actions with credit without CNPs, your being capable of performing the very same actions through CNPs would not only make these actions epistemically valid, these would also imply that CNPs have to be credited as part of the intelligent system.

The mind as a capacity

The view which looks at the mind or to knowledge as a capacity is still in good shape (Hyman, 2006). Philosophers have argued that capacities can be defined by what they are capable of. You can then go on and define the intellect as a capacity for human abilities (Kenny, 1989:123; 2000:68). Capacities differ from their exercises. To melt is a capacity of gold. Whereas gold melts at 1063°C, this capacity does not necessarily imply that melting at 1063°C is a constitutive part of any gold coin. It is purely one of its properties, but this capacity is not in any part of it. We do not need to be told about the parts of a gold coin to know that in normal conditions it will melt at 1063°C; you might even argue that both issues seem unrelated. Similarly, the capacity of flying of an airplane is not in any or every part of the airplane, such as its engine or its wings. We might say that matter is usually the vehicle of many and different capacities, but this vehicle is not all what there is to the capacity. There is always more to it.

Capacities and reductivism

Most capacities of the mind are described at a human level, not at a molecular or cellular level. For example, speech cannot be fully captured when limited to the activation of selective or unspecified brain areas. Speech is language, and this involves grammar, syntax, communication and human interaction at the higher of explanation level. In the same way we understand, e.g., that the mind is a capacity for thinking. Of course, since the capacities of the mind are interlinked with neural systems—albeit some capacities are more so than others—the description of what they do when on work is not coincidental with the description of its parts. These parts are rather the vehicle of the operations which it does. This is why it is more coherent to argue with the EMT that the material parts are constituents of its capacity, rather than to argue that the capacity is part of its underlying parts.

References


Widening the extended mind theory: the mind as a capacity
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